

Ethnic Identity as a Social Construct: Reification and Plasticity in Boundary Formation of Ethnic Groups in Nepal

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Abstract

Social anthropological debates have long been divided over the nature of ethnic identity and boundaries. Primordialist and essentialist perspectives tend to regard ethnic identities as fixed, immutable, and reified, whereas structuralist and postmodern approaches emphasize their fluid, mutable, and socially constructed character. Despite these theoretical divergences, a comprehensive examination of the dynamics between reification and plasticity in ethnic identity and boundaries remains insufficiently explored, particularly in highly diverse societies such as Nepal. This study aims to investigate the historical and contemporary conditions shaping ethnic identities and boundaries in Nepal. Employing a historical-comparative method, it analyzes secondary data to examine whether ethnic identities and boundaries have remained reified or have undergone processes of transformation over time. The findings suggest that both internal dynamics and external pressures contribute to shifts in ethnic identities and boundaries. In particular, changing economic conditions and emerging opportunities act as catalytic forces, rendering ethnic identities more malleable and plastic rather than permanently fixed and durable.

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Introduction

Identity is widely regarded as a complex and multifaceted concept. At one level, it refers to an individual's sense of self; at another, it denotes one's social positioning in relation to others. Both personal and social dimensions, including culture, ethnicity, gender, class, and patterns of social relationships, therefore, shape identity. Rather than being static, identity is dynamic and evolves through interaction and experience over time.

Erikson (1968), in his theory of psychosocial development, conceptualized identity formation as a central developmental task of adolescence, during which individuals explore and integrate various roles and values into a coherent sense of self. Beyond psychological approaches, identity is also deeply embedded in social structures and cultural processes. Barth (1998) emphasized that identities are constructed within discourse and shaped by demographic, historical, and economic-cultural contexts.

From a sociological perspective, identity is often distinguished into personal identity and social identity. Personal identity refers to the unique traits and life experiences that differentiate individuals, whereas social identity refers to membership in social categories or groups such as nationality, ethnicity, or religion. Tajfel and Turner (1979), through Social Identity Theory, argued that individuals derive a significant part of their self-concept from group membership. Postmodern scholars further extend this argument by rejecting essentialist notions of identity and portraying it instead as fluid, fragmented, and discursively constructed.

Consequently, scholarly debates persist regarding whether identity should be understood as fixed and reified or as fluid and indeterminate. This article engages with this debate by focusing specifically on the plasticity of ethnic identity and examining how internal dynamics and external pressures shape ethnic identities and boundaries through processes of reification and transformation.

Ethnic identity refers to an individual's sense of belonging to a particular ethnic group and the meaning attributed to that membership through shared culture, language, ancestry, traditions, and collective history. Phinney (1990) conceptualized ethnic identity as a dynamic and multidimensional construct encompassing self-identification, commitment, pride, and participation in cultural practices. Ethnic identity thus operates as both a personal and social construct, shaped by internal psychological processes as well as broader social contexts. From a developmental standpoint, ethnic identity evolves, particularly during adolescence, as individuals explore and commit to their cultural heritage (Phinney & Ong, 2007). Sociologists and social psychologists alike emphasize that ethnic

identity is negotiated within social frameworks, where individuals continually redefine their group affiliations in response to social interactions, power relations, and structural constraints. In this sense, ethnic identity is closely aligned with Social Identity Theory, which highlights how group membership fosters solidarity while simultaneously distinguishing in-groups from out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

In the Nepali context, ethnic identity is shaped by the country's rich cultural diversity, complex social stratification, and shifting political history. Nepal is home to a large number of ethnic groups, each characterized by distinct languages, religious traditions, dress patterns, cuisines, and cultural practices. The country's ethnic landscape has historically been structured through both caste (*jati*) and indigenous nationality (*janajati*) classifications, formally recognized in the National Population and Housing Census 1991. Janajati groups such as the Newar, Tamang, Rai, Limbu, Magar, Gurung, and Sherpa maintain distinct ethnic identities through language, ritual life, and social customs. At the same time, the caste-based hierarchy rooted in Hindu social organization has historically shaped the identities of groups such as Bahun (Brahmin), Chhetri, and Dalit communities, as critically examined by Bista (1991).

Ethnic identity in Nepal has been significantly reconfigured by political transformations. The democratic movement of 1990 and the People's Movement of 2006 catalyzed demands for inclusion, recognition, and proportional representation among marginalized ethnic communities. Scholars such as Gellner (2007) and Lawoti (2012) argue that ethnic identity in Nepal is not merely a matter of cultural preservation but is deeply intertwined

with struggles over power, state restructuring, and social justice. Thus, ethnic identity in Nepal must be understood within broader processes of state formation, democratization, and socio-economic change. Since the 1990s, the interplay between ethnicity, political mobilization, and economic opportunity has increasingly demonstrated the plastic and negotiable character of ethnic identities, challenging earlier assumptions of their fixed and reified nature.

Identity has increasingly been understood as a dynamic and negotiated phenomenon rather than a fixed essence. Appiah (2018) argues that identity possesses both subjective and objective dimensions: it is shaped by how individuals see themselves and by how they are socially categorized. He further emphasizes that identities are not merely inherited but are also influenced by individual choices and everyday practices. His critique of reification is particularly significant, as it challenges the mistaken belief that social categories naturally bind individuals into groups of shared fate. By distinguishing between orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxy (right practice), Appiah (2018) demonstrates that identity—especially religious identity—is often sustained through lived practices rather than rigid doctrinal adherence. His rejection of scriptural determinism further reveals that religious traditions are internally contested and open to reinterpretation, thereby undermining essentialist claims about fixed identities.

Complementing this perspective, Crenshaw (1991), through the concept of intersectionality, shows that identity is shaped by overlapping structures such as gender, class, and ethnicity, indicating that ethnic identity cannot be understood in isolation from other social positions. Together, these perspectives establish identity as fluid, negotiated, and contingent.

Theoretical debates on ethnicity reinforce this non-essentialist understanding. Brubaker (2002) critiques “groupism,” the tendency to treat ethnic groups as discrete, bounded, and enduring entities. Instead, he proposes focusing on “groupness” as a variable and event-based process. Constructivist approaches similarly view ethnic groups as socially constructed and historically contingent, while postmodern perspectives highlight fragmentation and the erosion of fixed boundaries. Although rational choice and social network theories acknowledge certain strategic stabilizations of group identity, Brubaker’s central argument shifts attention from static groups to processes of categorization, mobilization, and boundary-making. This theoretical reorientation challenges primordialist and essentialist views that regard ethnic groups as innate and unchangeable. In this regard, Gellner (2007) critiques primordialism and suggests that ethnic retention often reflects historical and structural conditions rather than inherent cultural fixity. In Nepal, he observes that relative isolation historically sustained ethnic distinctiveness, yet increased interaction and modernization have gradually transformed ethnic boundaries.

Empirical studies from Nepal strongly illustrate this fluid and negotiated character of ethnicity. Levine (1987) notes that despite Nepal’s immense diversity, ethnic contrasts are often simplified into binaries such as Hindu versus Buddhist or caste versus tribe. However, her research in Humla reveals significant mobility and interdependence: generational shifts in ritual practices, the adoption of the sacred thread (*janai*), and variations in food taboos within the same family demonstrate that ethnic boundaries are neither rigid nor uniformly applied. Similarly, Fürer-Haimendorf (1966) documents cases of Bumra villagers adopting high-caste symbols and claiming Chhetri status, illustrating strategic

ethnic mobility and the reorientation of social affiliations. These examples reveal ethnicity as a negotiable social process rather than a fixed inheritance.

Further evidence emerges from studies of the Thakali by Fisher (2001, 2012). Fisher shows that while Thakali society ideally promotes endogamy, intermarriage does occur, and the social status of offspring is determined through contextual negotiation. Socio-cultural, geographical, and economic factors contribute to boundary formation, yet processes such as Hinduization, Sanskritization, business expansion, inter-caste marriage, and even de-Hinduization continuously reshape identity. Fisher (2001, 2012) emphasizes that ethnicity evolves through the interaction of internal dynamics and external pressures, including state policies and global influences. When traditional boundaries weaken, new solidarities and forms of brotherhood emerge, demonstrating the transformative and adaptive nature of ethnic identity.

Barth (1998) argues that ethnic boundaries and identities change primarily through economic conditions, population pressure, and assimilation processes. Thus, ethnic identity is not fixed or reified; it can shift when material and demographic circumstances change. Using the example of the Fur, he further explains that some members of the Fur change their identity and become nomadic cattle Arabs because limited investment opportunities exist in Fur villages. Nomadic life may offer better economic prospects for them. Conversely, the accumulation of capital and opportunities among nomads initially attracted Fur households, and, once they achieved economic success, they joined Baggara political units. This illustration by Barth (1998) demonstrates that ethnic identity is mutable and

changes when economic advantages favor an alternative way of life. Identity here is closely linked to livelihood and access to capital.

Similarly, the assimilation of non-Yao populations contributing to Yao expansion in China shows that the demographic balance between ethnic groups can change as one group expands at the expense of others. Such processes do not necessarily create stability but may contribute to a gradual reduction of cultural diversity and increased plasticity in ethnicity.

The political dimension of ethnicity further complicates this picture. Calhoun (1993) argues that ethnicity becomes politically salient when mobilized around resource competition, marginalization, and cultural survival. Ethnic identity, therefore, is socially constructed and continually reinterpreted over time, possessing a dual capacity to foster solidarity while also generating exclusion and conflict. In the Nepali context, Sharma (1986) suggests that Nepal resembles a “salad bowl” or “rainbow” rather than a melting pot, indicating coexistence without complete assimilation. He warns, however, that emerging issues related to language, religion, and cultural recognition may produce new tensions in the future. This observation indicates that ethnicity in Nepal is not static but is continuously redefined within changing socio-political contexts.

Taken together, these philosophical arguments, theoretical debates, and empirical studies converge on a central insight: ethnic identity is not innate, fixed, or purely primordial; rather, it is socially constructed, practiced, negotiated, and reshaped over time. However, despite substantial evidence of ethnic fluidity and mobility in Nepal, public discourse, administrative classifications, and political mobilizations often continue to treat ethnic

groups as bounded and enduring entities. This tension between lived fluidity and institutional reification creates a significant analytical gap. Therefore, it becomes necessary to systematically investigate how ethnic identity becomes plasticized in Nepal and to identify the principal processes—ritual transformation, intermarriage, political mobilization, socio-economic change, modernization, and global influence—through which such ethnic plasticity occurs.

Ethnic identity in Nepal has long been interpreted through competing theoretical lenses. Classical primordialist and essentialist perspectives portray ethnic groups as fixed, kinship-based, culturally bounded, and enduring entities (Gellner, 2007). Similarly, social anthropological and conventional “groupist” approaches assume ethnicity to consist of discrete and tangible social units (Brubaker, 2002). However, constructivist and postmodern critiques challenge this reification, emphasizing contingency, fluctuation, and the situational emergence of “groupness” rather than fixed groups. Brubaker argues that ethnicity should be treated as a variable process rather than a stable essence.

Philosophically, Appiah (2018) further complicates the issue by distinguishing between the subjective and objective dimensions of identity. Identity is shaped not only by social categorization but also by individual choice, intersectionality (as discussed by Crenshaw, 1991), and everyday practices (orthopraxy). Appiah (2018) critiques reification—the mistaken belief that social categories bind individuals into fixed groups of shared fate—and challenges scriptural determinism by showing how religious identities are interpreted and contested within traditions. These arguments imply that identities are negotiated, practiced, and reinterpreted rather than merely inherited.

In the Nepali context, empirical studies reveal a striking tension between theoretical claims of bounded ethnicity and the lived realities of fluidity. Nepali (1965) and Gellner (2007) note that ethnic retention in Nepal has historically been linked to limited external contact but is increasingly changing. Levine (1987) documents cases in Humla where caste and ethnic practices shift across generations—such as the adoption of the sacred thread (*janai*) and changes in food taboos—illustrating intra-family variation and mobility. Fürer-Haimendorf (1966) similarly describes Bumra villagers adopting high-caste symbols to claim Chhetri status, indicating strategic ethnic mobility. Studies of the Thakali by Fisher (2001, 2012) demonstrate that ethnic boundaries are socio-culturally constructed and reshaped through Hinduization, Sanskritization, intermarriage, economic entrepreneurship, and broader socio-political transformations. He further emphasizes that ethnicity evolves through internal dynamics and external pressures, including state policies and global influences. Likewise, Calhoun (1993) argues that ethnicity becomes politically salient when mobilized around resource competition, marginalization, and cultural survival, highlighting its dual capacity for solidarity and exclusion. Sharma (1986) observes that Nepal’s ethnic and cultural identities resemble a *salad bowl* or *rainbow* rather than a melting pot, suggesting coexistence alongside emerging tensions.

Despite Nepal’s immense ethnic diversity, contrasts are often simplified into binaries—Hindu vs. Buddhist, caste vs. tribe, hill vs. Terai—thereby masking the dynamic and negotiated character of ethnic belonging. While anthropological scholarship acknowledges ethnic fluidity, public discourse, political mobilization, and administrative categorization

frequently treat ethnic groups as fixed and bounded. This contradiction between fluid lived identities and reified political representations creates a significant conceptual and empirical gap. Therefore, the central problem of this study is to examine the plasticity of ethnic identity in Nepal in contrast to reification—that is, to analyze how ethnic identities are constructed, negotiated, reshaped, and mobilized across changing socio-cultural and political contexts. Although existing studies provide fragmented evidence of ethnic mobility and boundary transformation, there remains insufficient theoretical synthesis explaining the mechanisms and processes through which such plasticity occurs. Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research questions:

- o What are the main processes of ethnic plasticity in Nepal?
- o How do ethnic identities and boundaries plasticize in Nepal?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to move beyond static and reified notions of ethnicity and contribute to a process-oriented understanding of ethnic identity formation and boundaries making in Nepal. Thus, it aims to examine the main processes of ethnic plasticity and find out the current status of ethnic identities and boundaries in Nepal.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on secondary data analysis, focusing on the construction, transformation, and contestation of ethnic identities and boundaries among Nepali ethnic groups. Rather than generating primary data, the research systematically reviews and analyzes existing scholarly literature, including peer-reviewed journal articles and edited book chapters that address issues of ethnicity, identity, and boundary formation in Nepal.

The first stage of the study involved the collection of relevant literature on ethnic identity, with particular attention to conceptual debates surrounding reification and plasticity. A substantial body of academic work was gathered from various sources, including university archives, digital databases, and published books. These materials provided a theoretical and empirical foundation for understanding how ethnic identities are constructed, maintained, and transformed over time.

The collected literature was then analytically reviewed and categorized into two broad perspectives. On the one hand, several scholars emphasize the reification of ethnic identities, highlighting how identities in Nepal are often institutionalized, politicized, and treated as fixed and bounded categories. These arguments are particularly evident in discussions of ethnic mobilization, state restructuring, and identity-based politics. On the other hand, a significant number of studies argue for the plasticity of ethnic identities and boundaries, demonstrating that they are fluid, negotiable, and shaped by changing socio-political, economic, and cultural contexts. These perspectives underline the role of both internal dynamics—such as community practices, cultural adaptation, and inter-group relations—and external influences—such as state policies, globalization, and development interventions—in reshaping ethnic identities.

Based on this analytical review, the study employs a comparative interpretive approach to examine how different ethnic groups in Nepal experience and negotiate reification and plasticity. In particular, the study focuses on selected groups such as the Thakali, Sherpa, Chhetri, various Janajati groups, and Dalits, as these communities have been widely discussed in the literature in relation to identity transformation

and boundary-making processes. Through this comparative lens, the study explores whether ethnic identities are better understood as fixed (reified) or flexible (plastic), or as a dynamic interplay of both processes.

The data for this study were obtained from archival sources, including published academic works and institutional repositories. As such, the research is limited to the interpretation of existing knowledge and does not include field-based empirical verification. One important limitation of this approach is that it does not fully capture recent developments in ethnic identity formation, particularly during the period following Nepal's transition to a federal democratic republic. Consequently, contemporary trends in the reification and plasticity of ethnic identities may not be comprehensively represented. Despite these limitations, the study provides a systematic and theoretically informed analysis of ethnic identities and boundaries in Nepal by synthesizing diverse scholarly perspectives. It contributes to a deeper understanding of how ethnic identities are simultaneously stabilized and transformed within broader socio-political processes.

Results and Discussion

The processes of reification and plasticity in Nepali ethnic identities are shaped by both internal and external influences. Primordialist and essentialist perspectives emphasize the reification of ethnic identity—the process through which social identities become fixed, essentialized, and viewed as unchanging. In contrast, structuralist and postmodern approaches highlight plasticity, referring to the dynamic, adaptive, and fluid nature of identities that evolve in response to social, cultural, and political forces, as well as through the interaction between national and international actors.

In Nepal, the interplay of historical, political, cultural, migratory, touristic, and global factors significantly affects these processes of reification and plasticity. For analytical clarity, these dynamics are examined through two broad dimensions: internal influences and external pressures.

Internal Influences in Shaping the Reification and Plasticity of Nepali Ethnic Identities

Nepal's internal social structure has long been shaped by the Hindu caste system under the *Muluki Ain* (1854), a legal code that formalized social stratification (Bista, 1991). This codification of caste and ethnic groups reified hierarchical identities by categorizing groups such as Bahun, Chhetri, Janajati, and Dalit within a broader framework corresponding to Brahmin, Chhetri, Vaishya, and Shudra classifications. Over time, these identities became rigid and deeply embedded in everyday social life. Such reification suppressed the fluidity of ethnic identities, privileging dominant Hindu groups while marginalizing subordinate communities.

Shared languages, traditions, and rituals within ethnic groups act as important markers of identity, fostering internal cohesion. For example, Janajati communities such as the Tamang, Rai, Gurung, and Tharu maintain distinct languages and cultural practices that have historically reinforced their ethnic boundaries. However, these practices also exhibit plasticity, as younger generations increasingly adapt to mainstream Nepali and global cultural norms, demonstrating the dynamic nature of identity.

Ethnic reification intensified during Nepal's democratic movements, particularly after 1990 and during the People's Movement of 2006, as marginalized groups demanded recognition, rights, and inclusion. The emergence of the Janajati movement played a critical role in

reifying ethnic identities by categorizing diverse indigenous groups under a common political platform (Lawoti, 2012). At the same time, the movement also revealed identity plasticity, as groups strategically adapted and redefined their identities to secure political representation and access to resources.

In urban centers such as Kathmandu, increasing inter-ethnic marriage, migration, and educational expansion have further fostered the plasticity of identity and boundaries. Empirical observations suggest that, on the one hand, some individuals began adopting Dalit surnames to access reservation opportunities provided by the government. On the other hand, individuals from Janajati or Dalit backgrounds sometimes assimilate into dominant Bahun–Chhetri cultural practices, along with market-oriented norms, to achieve social and economic mobility. Such plasticity, however, is sometimes criticized as “cultural loss” (Gellner, 2007), despite the emergence of new forms of identity.

Internal influences within Nepali ethnic groups, therefore, contribute simultaneously to both the reification and plasticity of ethnic identity. From Appiah’s (2018) perspective, identity contains both subjective and objective dimensions. Within Nepali ethnic communities, internal beliefs regarding shared ancestry, ritual purity, sacred traditions, and cultural practices may solidify identity through reification—the mistaken assumption that members are naturally bound together by a fixed shared fate. When orthodoxy (correct belief) is emphasized over orthopraxy (correct practice), identity tends to become rigid and doctrinal. Likewise, forms of scriptural determinism—where communities treat religious texts or traditions as unchangeable—reinforce the perception that ethnic boundaries are natural and immutable.

These internal narratives strengthen the primordialist tendencies described by Gellner (2007), in which ethnicity appears kinship-based, deep-rooted, and culturally fixed. Political mobilization around language, religion, or cultural survival (as noted by Calhoun) can further internalize solidarity and sharpen symbolic distinctions, thereby reinforcing bounded group identity.

At the same time, internal dynamics also produce plasticity. Appiah’s (2018) emphasis on individual choice and lived practice suggests that identity is enacted rather than simply inherited. Changes in ritual behavior (orthopraxy), reinterpretation of religious norms, and the negotiation of everyday practices gradually reshape ethnic belonging from within. Crenshaw’s (1991) concept of intersectionality further shows that ethnicity is inflected by class, gender, and region, making internal differentiation inevitable.

Empirical cases from Nepal clearly illustrate this process. Levine (1987) documents generational shifts in ritual practice in Humla, where the adoption of the sacred thread (*janai*) and changes in food taboos occur within the same family, demonstrating internal mobility rather than rigid boundaries. Similarly, Fürer-Haimendorf (1966) shows how Bumra villagers strategically adopted high-caste symbols to redefine their ethnic status. In the Thakali case, Fisher (2001, 2012) highlights how endogamy, intermarriage, economic adaptation, Hinduization, and even de-Hinduization continuously renegotiate ethnic boundaries. These internal adjustments reflect what Brubaker (2002) calls shifting *groupness*, in which ethnicity becomes situational and contingent rather than permanently fixed.

Thus, internal influences in Nepali ethnic groups operate dually. When communities emphasize shared fate, doctrinal purity, and political solidarity, they contribute to reification. When they reinterpret traditions, adapt practices, intermarry, and negotiate new solidarities, they generate plasticity. Ethnic identity in Nepal, therefore, is neither wholly rigid nor entirely fluid; rather, it is continuously shaped through internal negotiations among belief, practice, power, and everyday social interaction.

Internally, ethnic groups in Nepal—such as the Thakali, Sherpa, Magar, and Tharu—rely on cultural markers including language, religion, dress, and customary practices to define and reinforce their identities. Fisher’s analysis of the Sherpa community demonstrates how cultural distinctiveness is maintained through practices such as Tibetan Buddhism and high-altitude trade traditions, while simultaneously adapting to modern contexts, particularly tourism. Identity plasticity emerges through communities’ negotiation between traditional norms and new economic opportunities. For example, Sherpas adapted to mountaineering tourism for economic reasons, reshaping perceptions of their identity as “elite mountaineers” while retaining core elements of their ethnic heritage.

However, internal disputes and generational differences may create tensions regarding what constitutes an “authentic” identity. Groups such as the Sherpas often selectively highlight or downplay particular cultural elements, illustrating the plastic nature of identity. Fisher (1990) notes the role of agency in this process, showing how Sherpas reinvent aspects of their public image for economic mobility while maintaining cultural continuity. In this way, internal influences simultaneously shape ethnic identity through both plasticity and reification.

External Pressures in Shaping Reification and Plasticity of Nepali Ethnic Identities

Although Nepal was never formally colonized, colonial knowledge systems influenced ethnic classifications. British anthropologists and administrators, for example, during the Gurkha recruitment process, categorized ethnic groups such as the Gurung, Magar, and Rai based on perceived martial traits, contributing to the reification of their identities. This legacy continues to shape perceptions of Nepal’s ethnic groups, portraying them collectively as “brave Gorkhali.” These external influences have persisted since the Anglo-Nepal War (1814–1816) and continue to affect global understandings of Nepali ethnicities.

Modernization and global migration have also facilitated the fluidity of Nepali ethnic identities. Many Nepali migrant workers, particularly in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, navigate multiple cultural and ethnic spaces, reshaping their understanding of identity (Lawoti, 2012). The influence of media and education further promotes cultural hybridization, especially among urban youth. International organizations and donor agencies have shaped Nepal’s identity politics by funding programs for indigenous rights and multicultural policies. Initiatives recognizing Janajati and Dalit groups have simultaneously reified and empowered ethnic identities (Gellner, 2007). However, critics argue that such interventions can sometimes oversimplify complex identities by promoting essentialized categories for policy purposes. Transnational migration has also facilitated identity plasticity among Nepali diaspora communities, who negotiate between their ethnic heritage and the cultures of host countries. For example, Nepali communities in the UK and the US often redefine their ethnic

and national identities to align with global multicultural ideals (Lawoti, 2012).

External pressures and national–international agencies play a crucial role in shaping both the reification and plasticity of ethnic identity in Nepal. From Appiah’s (2018) perspective, identity encompasses both self and social dimensions. As Levine (1987) notes, state law transformed the Bhotiya into Tamang after 1932 through legal codification. Other external factors—such as the state, census systems, political parties, NGOs, and international development agencies—primarily influence the objective dimension of identity by categorizing, labeling, and institutionalizing ethnic groups. When the state formally recognizes ethnic categories for representation, affirmative action, or resource distribution, it may unintentionally promote reification, reinforcing the perception that these categories are fixed, bounded, and composed of groups with a shared fate.

This aligns with Brubaker’s (2002) critique of “groupism,” in which ethnicity is treated as a concrete and enduring entity rather than as contingent “groupness.” Political mobilization around marginalization and cultural survival, as discussed by Calhoun (1993), can intensify solidarity while also hardening boundaries, transforming flexible identities into politicized blocs. National identity-building projects, language policies, and religious narratives may further institutionalize orthodoxy and scriptural determinism, contributing to rigid interpretations of belonging.

At the same time, these external forces also generate plasticity. Constructivist perspectives emphasize that ethnicity is socially constructed and historically contingent; increased contact through migration, education, market expansion, and globalization weakens the isolation that

Gellner (2007) associates with ethnic retention in Nepal. Exposure to new ideas, development programs, and global discourses on rights and multiculturalism encourages reinterpretation of tradition and adaptation of identity. Fisher (2012) explicitly argues that socio-political context, power relations, and national–international agencies actively reshape ethnicity. For example, affirmative inclusion policies, donor-driven identity politics, and transnational ethnic networks may encourage groups to redefine themselves strategically—sometimes reviving traditions, sometimes reformulating them. External pressures thus interact with internal dynamics to produce new solidarities, hybrid identities, and renegotiated boundaries. Moreover, intersectional influences described by Crenshaw (1991) become more visible under globalization. Gender rights movements, human rights discourses, and international norms challenge scriptural determinism and rigid cultural claims, encouraging reinterpretation of religious and ethnic traditions. In this sense, external pressures foster orthopraxy over orthodoxy—practices adapt even if beliefs claim continuity.

National and international agencies contribute to reification when they institutionalize ethnic categories, politicize differences, and distribute resources along fixed lines. Simultaneously, they contribute to plasticity by increasing interaction, promoting new norms, enabling mobility, and encouraging reinterpretation of tradition. Ethnic identity in Nepal, therefore, evolves through a dialectical relationship between external structuring forces and adaptive responses, producing both hardened boundaries and newly negotiated forms of belonging.

Fisher (1990) highlights the impact of tourism on Sherpa identity. Western perceptions

have reified Sherpas as “the loyal and brave mountain people,” reducing their complex culture to a stereotype of hardy climbers. Simultaneously, Sherpas capitalized on this plasticity by embracing the tourism industry, reshaping their ethnic identity into a global brand while preserving traditional cultural roots. In Nepal, state policies—such as the promotion of the Nepali language and Hindu hegemony during the Panchayat era—reified ethnic identities by marginalizing non-dominant groups. However, with the political changes post-1990 and post-2006, there has been greater recognition of ethnic diversity. Ethnic groups now exercise plasticity to demand political rights and recognition under federalism.

External colonial perspectives have historically reified Nepali ethnic groups. For instance, British colonial officers constructed Gurkha identity as “martial” and loyal, reinforcing this perception across generations. Fisher’s analysis indicates that while Sherpas resisted absolute reification, Western romanticization of Himalayan cultures (e.g., as “noble savages” or “spiritual people”) shaped external perceptions and created economic opportunities. His work underscores the tension between external forces attempting to reify identities (for tourism, politics, or colonial purposes) and the internal plasticity of ethnic groups like the Sherpas, who adapt their identities to their advantage. On the one hand, Westerners viewed Sherpas as part of the “unchanging Himalayas,” reducing their dynamic culture to stereotypes. On the other hand, Sherpas navigated these stereotypes, reinventing themselves as mountaineers and cultural brokers in a globalized economy. Similarly, other marginalized ethnic groups in Nepal, such as the Tamangs and Tharus, contend with state-driven reification but employ identity plasticity to engage in social movements for rights and recognition.

Evaluation of Reification and Plasticity in Shaping Ethnic Identities and Boundaries

The processes of reification and plasticity in Nepali ethnic identities and boundaries are deeply intertwined and shaped by historical, cultural, political, and global influences. Internal factors, such as the caste system and political mobilization, have contributed to the reification of ethnic categories while also creating spaces for identity and boundary plasticity through cultural adaptation and political negotiation. After the political changes of the 1950s, external influences—such as globalization, international development, and migration—further enhanced the plasticity of ethnic identity by introducing new cultural and economic dynamics.

However, these processes are not without challenges. Reification, while politically empowering for marginalized groups, can reinforce essentialist thinking and deepen inter-ethnic divisions. For example, debates over federalism in Nepal often center on ethnic-based territorial divisions, raising concerns about exclusion and conflict (Lawoti, 2012). Conversely, identity plasticity, while adaptive, can risk undermining cultural distinctiveness and fostering assimilation into dominant mainstream norms. Fisher (1990), for instance, may overemphasize Sherpa agency at the expense of recognizing structural constraints imposed by global capitalism or state power. At the same time, he notes that identity plasticity is not equally accessible to all ethnic groups in Nepal, as class and regional disparities shape opportunities. While Sherpas have successfully navigated reification through tourism, marginalized groups—such as Dalits or other indigenous communities—face greater challenges in exercising plasticity due to systemic discrimination.

Conclusion

In Nepal, internal influences—such as caste hierarchies and their interplay, political mobilization through reservations and quotas, and cultural processes like Hinduization, acculturation, and assimilation—intersect with external factors, including globalization, migration, and international policies, in shaping the processes of reification and plasticity in ethnic identities. Based on comparative analysis, ethnic plasticity in Nepal historically and sociologically precedes reification. The literature consistently shows that ethnic identity is first formed, reshaped, and negotiated through lived practices, mobility, reinterpretation, and social interaction before it becomes hardened into fixed categories.

Philosophically, Appiah (2018) demonstrates that identity is shaped by practice (orthopraxy), individual choice, and ongoing reinterpretation rather than rigid belief systems. It is justifiable to argue that identities and boundaries are initially fluid and enacted in the everyday life of diverse groups in Nepal, particularly in the pursuit of economic opportunities. Similarly, Brubaker (2002) argues that “groupness” is contingent and event-based; only later, through political mobilization and institutionalization, does it appear as a stable “group.”

In the Nepali context, empirical evidence from Levine (1987) and Fisher (1990, 2012) shows that ritual change, intermarriage, Sanskritization, economic adaptation, and shifting solidarities continuously reshape ethnic identities and boundaries. These adaptive processes reflect plasticity as the primary condition of ethnic life. As postmodernists underscore, boundaries may be strengthened during conflict or weakened during cooperation. Reification emerges later

when political competition, state categorization, resource allocation, and identity-based mobilization solidify these flexible identities into bounded and standardized forms, as discussed by Calhoun (1993).

Thus, what appears today as fixed ethnic blocs in Nepal is often the institutional crystallization of previously fluid and negotiated identities. In contemporary Nepal, plasticity is the foundational process through which ethnic identities and boundaries are first formed and transformed through interaction and adaptation, with economic conditions, opportunities, and individual mobility playing vital roles, and only subsequently reified through political, administrative, and ideological consolidation.

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